

# The Benefits of Sustained Silent Reading: Scientific Research and Common Sense Converge

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Once teachers unravel the facts from the misinterpretations and opinions, they will find that Sustained Silent Reading is not only intuitively appealing but also is supported by research.

As reading teachers, we recognize the joy that comes from getting lost in the pages of a good book. We fondly recall the books that inspired and changed us as children and that still influence us as adults. As teachers, we want to awaken that love of literacy in our students and invite them to experience that magic in our classrooms. We want them to grow into “skilled, passionate, habitual, and critical readers” (Atwell, 2007). However, confusion over and misinterpretation of federal research on independent reading in the United States have caused some to question this vision of literacy. Teachers and administrators are now wondering if reading books in school helps students increase their reading skills, much less appreciate the value of reading.

There are many misconceptions about the role Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) should play in reading instruction. Much of the confusion stems from the research on SSR in the Report of the National Reading Panel (NRP; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Although it was published in 2000, the report still has clout. In fact, *Guidance for the Reading First Program* requires five “Effective Components of Reading Instruction” based on the NRP’s findings (U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002, p. 3). The document also cites the NRP’s research methodology as the gold standard for

scientifically based reading research (SBRR). Clearly, it is SBRR that both defines and confines the curricula in Reading First schools. Touted as the definitive research on reading instruction, the NRP report still influences education policy in the United States and the materials and methods schools adopt.

It is not surprising that the NRP report has generated spirited and even angry debate among educators and researchers, ranging from criticism of its methodology to contradictions in the panel’s summary of its findings to charges of conflicts of interest among NRP and Reading First panel members (Coles, 2003; Cunningham, 2001; Garan, 2001; Krashen, 2005; U.S. Department of Education Office of the Inspector General, 2006). In the midst of a storm of controversy, one of the most divisive criticisms of the NRP is the claim that its findings do not support SSR in schools (Stahl, 2004). In this article, we will clarify the panel’s research with the words of the NRP report and those of its panel members and contributors. We will then offer suggestions on variations of pure SSR and how teachers can use them in their classrooms.

## On Defining SSR or Any Instructional Method

It’s tempting to accept research at face value, especially if it’s labeled as *scientific* and involves quantitative methods. However, as consumers of research, teachers must approach all studies with careful scrutiny rather than unquestioning acceptance. This is true even with—or, some might suggest, particularly with—research based on a scientific, medical model that strives to establish firm causal relationships between teaching methods and results. There are just too many confounding factors that can and

do contaminate the research process and make it nearly impossible to apply findings to all children in all schools and to effectively standardize instruction. We will examine some of those general challenges to educational research and then apply them to the studies on SSR in particular.

One of the biggest obstacles in applying an experimental model to educational research is that classrooms are not laboratories. Therefore, conditions cannot be controlled or variables completely refined. There is a slipperiness, an illusiveness, to even the very definitions of teaching methods that create roadblocks to the goal of scientific certainty right from the beginning.

That is, although teaching methods may be defined at their inception and in the literature, they seldom remain pure as teachers adjust them to fit their own beliefs and teaching styles. Therefore, at the outset, researchers are faced with the challenge of finding pure examples of any method they wish to study. This can be particularly problematic in SBRR because it is based on an experimental research model that must isolate and refine variables, as cleanly as possible, so the findings can be directly attributed to the method being studied. However, because teachers tweak methods, the best that can be said when defining most teaching methods is “sometimes” or “often, such and such is the case.”

And so it is with SSR. Like other instructional methods, it can and does operate along a continuum. At one end of the continuum is pure SSR as a time devoted to free reading during which students read books of their own choice, without assessment, skills work, monitoring, or instruction from the teacher. In fact, often the teacher reads a book along with the students, thus providing a model of literacy for the class. Other teachers implement SSR by monitoring the type and the number of books students read; they may also administer assessments, keep reading checklists, and ask questions or encourage student discussion about books (Atwell, 2007; Gambrell, 2007; Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008).

Regardless of the amount of teacher involvement, however, the distinguishing feature of SSR is that every day for at least 15 to 30 minutes, students are permitted a block of time to read a book, usually of their own choice (Stahl, 2004). SSR can also be found under a variety of labels including, but not limited to, DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) and SQUIRT (Super Quiet Reading Time), as listed in the

NRP report (NICHD, 2000, p. 3-24). Now, we will examine the problems the NRP experienced in attempting to gather significant research on SSR and why any statements opposed to independent reading—even those made by panel members—cannot be based on sound research.

## The NRP on SSR

There has been considerable criticism of the methodology behind, inherent flaws in, and reporting of the NRP’s findings, and it is not our purpose to revisit that general debate here. Rather, we will now focus on how the narrow, questionable selection criteria for studies on SSR led to a misinterpretation of the role research plays in reading.

First, as consumers of research, teachers must understand that the NRP did not find that SSR is ineffective. Nowhere did the report state that having children read in school is a bad idea. What it claimed was that there were not enough studies meeting the panel’s methodological requirements to draw any conclusions. In fact, the panel found only 14 studies that met their research criteria, and of those, “several...could not be analyzed because of serious methodological or reporting flaws that undermined their results” (NICHD, 2000, p. 3-24).

Perhaps one reason the NRP had problems finding enough experimental studies on SSR and the reason its findings have not been unanimously embraced by the reading community is because it relied on a component-skills model of reading (Paris, 2005). That is, the panel operated on the assumption that reading skills can be taught in isolation, one at a time, and that once children accumulate knowledge of the individual letters and sounds that produce language, they will then be able to comprehend connected text as competent readers. That paradigm lends itself to the research methodology the panel chose to consider, and also to exclude, in its deliberations. Recall that the NRP sought causality from research and decided a priori on the selection criteria for the studies it would analyze (Cunningham, 2001, p. 327). In their quest for scientific certainty, the panel chose to rely solely on a medical model, using experimental treatments and control groups, even though few education researchers adopted such a model (NICHD, 2000, p. 5).

Nevertheless, the NRP chose an experimental model they believed would result in a direct

relationship between methods and results. Thus, the NRP's "methodological standards did not arise from the research literature on reading, but rather, were imposed upon it" (Cunningham, 2001, p. 326). It's not surprising, then, that few studies conformed to their opinions on how reading research should be conducted.

Given the lack of evidence as cited by the NRP, and given that the evidence the panel *did* use was weak and poorly designed, any conclusions that SSR does not benefit children cannot be a derivation of sound data. If the research is flawed, then so are any conclusions based on it. In point of fact, the NRP report itself did not draw any conclusions one way or the other about SSR:

It should be made clear that these findings [on the effectiveness of SSR] do not negate the positive influence SSR *may* have on reading fluency, nor do the findings negate the possibility that wide independent reading significantly influences vocabulary development and reading comprehension. Rather, there are simply not sufficient data from well-designed studies capable of testing questions of causation to substantiate causal claims. (NICHD, 2000, p. 13)

Yet another reason the NRP had problems finding enough studies on SSR is because independent silent reading was inappropriately placed in the fluency subgroup, rather than in the section on comprehension. In other words, the panel viewed independent

silent reading as a "treatment whose effectiveness could be measured with an oral reading dependent measure" (Cunningham, 2001, p. 333). As Cunningham noted, "No wonder they couldn't find a single study that evaluated...silent reading with an oral reading fluency test...at that point, they should have realized that perhaps they had put the research on [SSR] in the wrong subgroup" (p. 333).

Nevertheless, so committed was the panel to imposing a medical research model on reading methods that it described, in detail, the results of each and every one of the 14 experimental studies on SSR that it had already declared were weak in design and of

no use to its analysis of SSR (NICHD, 2000, pp. 3-24-3-27). On the other hand, it essentially ignored the "literally hundreds of correlational studies that find that the best readers read the most and poor readers read the least" (NICHD, 2000, p. 3-21). Among those studies the panel dismissed were the findings of The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), showing that "the more you read the better your vocabulary, your knowledge of the world, your ability to read and so on" (NICHD, 2000, p. 3-21). In other words, there were hundreds of studies to support SSR, but because they did not meet the panel's narrow selection criteria, the NRP excluded them.

Another reason the panel dismissed "literally hundreds" of studies correlating time spent reading with reading ability is that correlation is not causation. In other words, "it could be that if you read more, you are a better reader; but it also seems possible that better readers choose to read more" (NICHD, 2000, p. 3-21). However, there are flaws in that reasoning that educators should consider before eliminating SSR from their classrooms.

## The Illusion of Certainty in Research

First, causality can seldom be determined absolutely, even when the physical sciences use the medical model the NRP adopted for its methodology. Consider, for example, that if the medical profession dismissed correlational studies, it would not have concluded that smoking is hazardous to our health (Peace, 1985; Siepmann, 1999). Furthermore, humans bring a variety of physical characteristics, allergies, and unexplained resistance to treatments that make certainty—even in medicine—nearly impossible. How much more unpredictable then, are the social sciences, in which a myriad of human, as opposed to physical, factors come into play? Human interactions are complicated and messy. Therefore, simplistic and reductionist research methods are not always appropriate in spite of their appeal, and the results of such approaches are often arbitrary at best (Cronbach, 1975).

What's more, because the benefits of SSR are not immediate but evolve throughout a process, experimental studies are not always practical or even ethical, a consideration that may further deter researchers from implementing such methods.



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Consider, for instance, that to conduct an effective experiment on independent reading, researchers would need to establish a treatment group (one that reads independently) and a control group (one that doesn't read). What's more, the conditions imposed on these groups would need to be sustained over an extended period of time—the longer, the better. The amount of reading done by each group of students would have to be controlled as strictly as possible; the less reading done in the control group, the more accurate the results would be and vice versa. These methodological imperatives raise a question: What administrator or parent would allow children to participate in a study that prohibits, discourages, or drastically controls the amount of reading children can do over a long period of time?

It's no wonder, then, that there are so few “well-designed” experimental studies on independent reading. Although it's not impossible to conduct such research, it is difficult. It is nearly impossible to refine the variables and to exclude all confounding factors, such as students' motivation, their emotional problems, and other human characteristics, that can contaminate the results. In terms of the time and the conditions that must be controlled, then, researchers can seldom draw definitive conclusions and proclaim, “If you do this, then you *will* produce that.”

## The Lack of Consensus in the Field and Among Panel Members

As Cunningham (2001) stated, “The best science has the power to change the thinking of those who previously disagreed with it but are fair-minded enough to admit they were wrong once the case has been made” (p. 334). In other words, good science results in a reasonably strong consensus among open-minded professionals in a given field. Though there is a general consensus among many literacy experts concerning the benefits of having children read books of their own choice in school (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Gambrell, 2007; Krashen, 2001, 2005; Trelease, 2001), there is a noteworthy lack of scientific consensus among the NRP members themselves about the role SSR should play in reading instruction.

For example, one NRP member stated that SSR is “probably not a good idea” (Shanahan, 2006, p. 12). On the other hand, other panel members and

contributors disagree with that opinion (Pressley, Dolezal, Roehrig & Hilden, 2002; Stahl, 2004; Wu & Samuels, 2004). It is essential, then, that educators are aware of the varying interpretations of data that derive even from scientific research and that we cannot accept the findings, or the opinions of researchers, as absolutes. We will now examine some of the differing opinions of panel members and contributors about the benefits of SSR and scientific research subsequent to the release of the NRP report.

It is obvious from the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and Reading First, and from their reliance on SBRR, that not all research—and not all researchers—are given equal credence in the framing of educational policy. Clearly, SBRR is hot (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2008, p. 10). Conversely, qualitative research and researchers not federally sanctioned are not. Although we may not agree that one paradigm should prevail over other voices, and although it's not our intention to ignore the importance of qualitative studies in our discussion of SSR, we must acknowledge the power of federal research to regulate education policy. In the prevailing climate, clearly some researchers are given more credence than others. Therefore, in the following section of this article, we emphasize the connections of the researchers we cite to federally sanctioned studies, including the NRP report.

In 2004, a volume titled *The Voice of Evidence in Reading Research* (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004) was published under the auspices of several federal agencies including the NICHD, which also funded the NRP report (NICHD, 2000). The purpose of McCardle and Chhabra's (2004) book was to explain the scientific evidence on reading instruction, including the findings of the NRP report, to teachers and parents. NRP contributor Steven Stahl wrote the chapter explaining the findings of the Fluency subgroup, including the role of SSR in reading instruction. In that chapter (Stahl, 2004), he refuted the notion that SSR should not be part of the school curriculum.

First, Stahl (2004) agreed with Krashen (2001), noting that the “best studies” in independent reading are not experimental, but are, in fact, correlational (p. 206). Stahl also revealed that the NRP omitted a large body of *experimental* [emphasis added] longitudinal studies, known as the “book flood” studies (Elley, 2000; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). Those studies showed that increasing the amount of reading material available to children can “dramatically increase



reading achievement” (Stahl, 2004, p. 206). Stahl stated that the NRP excluded this series of studies because, “This work was done with second-language learners, generally in the South Pacific, so it was outside the purview of the NRP” (Stahl, 2004, p. 206). However, the omission of these studies represented an internal inconsistency in the NRP’s methodology, because the Phonemic Awareness section included studies done not only in other countries but in languages other than English (NICHD, 2000, p. 2-16).

Thus, we see that even in federal research, even within the very same report, the participating researchers do not always agree. There are no absolutes. And we see a lack of consensus among panel members about the methodology, as well as about how to interpret the findings, that renders definitive statements based on such studies highly questionable.

Consider that in his Fluency chapter, Stahl (2004) also cited Krashen (2001), Berliner (1981), and other researchers who advocated that the more time students spend with “eyes on text,” the better readers they will become (p. 190). After noting the omission of the book flood studies and citing researchers and literacy experts who advocate for more time spent reading, Stahl (2004) concluded,

Although the research reviewed by the NRP does not support the use of SSR, common sense suggests that children should have some time during the day to read books of their own choosing, if only for motivational purposes (see Turner, 1995). However, I suggest that teachers actively monitor children’s reading, both by going around the room to make sure children are on task and by asking questions about what children are reading, and encourage children to read books at an appropriate level. (p. 207)

Stahl (2004) recommended that students should spend 15 to 30 minutes of each day reading books of their own choice as an essential component of reading instruction (p. 201). Thus, in his chapter of the book written to interpret and implement the panel’s findings (McCardle & Chhabra, 2004), Stahl (2004), the NRP contributor, clearly refuted interpretations of the research that would discourage independent reading time in schools.

Samuels is another NRP member who advocates for independent reading in school. Samuels was co-chair of the Fluency subgroup that consisted of only three members. In 2004 at the IRA annual convention, Wu and Samuels (2004) presented a paper based on

their research, “How the Amount of Time Spent on Independent Reading Affects Reading Achievement: A Response to the National Reading Panel.” Their research was the result of a six-month, quasi-experimental study. Wu and Samuels (2004) reported the following:

Data analysis found that more time spent reading had a significant effect on achievement compared to a control condition where less time was allocated for independent reading. In addition, results found that poor readers showed significantly greater gains in word recognition and vocabulary than good readers. Third grade showed greater gains in comprehension than fifth grade. Furthermore, the results also showed that poor readers tended to have greater gains in vocabulary with 15 minutes of reading, but they had better gains on reading comprehension with 40 minutes of reading. (p. 2)

In addition to his coauthored, quasi-experimental study, Samuels also conducted a meta-analysis with Lewis that further established the benefits of SSR on student reading achievement (Lewis & Samuels, 2003).

Again, although we acknowledge and respect the contributions of many other well-known researchers showing the benefits of wide reading on students’ reading achievement (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2007; Krashen, 2001; Kuhn, 2004), we reiterate that we focused on NRP members and contributors because it is the federal research and researchers that frame school policy in the United States. It is important for teachers to recognize the lack of consensus among federally sanctioned researchers, as evidenced in the studies and reports subsequent to the NRP cited above. They provide strong evidence that time spent reading is *class time* well spent.

In summary then, given the following four pieces of evidence—(1) the insufficient data on SSR in the NRP report, (2) the lack of consensus among the panel’s members on the methodology and interpretations of the findings, (3) the overwhelming body of correlational evidence supporting SSR, and (4) the experimental or quasi-experimental studies completed subsequent to the NRP report that support SSR—we conclude there is a convergence of research and the views of NRP researchers to support SSR in schools.

## SBRR Meets Common Sense

In life, common sense routinely prevails over research. Few of us conduct experiments to inform every decision we make. Sometimes, common sense just makes sense. In education, however, there is a disconnect that derives from the assumption that conclusions resulting from SBRR are somehow sacrosanct. There is a mistaken notion that the findings of research are absolute. And therefore, so the reasoning goes, teachers must abrogate their own experience, professional judgment, and common sense to mandates that have not even met with consensus among the researchers who served on the panels that reported the studies.

The fracture in that logic becomes obvious if we base our approach to other areas of our lives strictly on what research “proves.” For example, if we accept the lack of experimental research as a reason to eliminate SSR from schools, then we should also call a halt to practicing sports, or musical instruments, or phonics worksheets, or math homework, or preparing students to take standardized tests for that matter. Either we believe practice helps or we don’t.

There is yet another consideration, and that is the message we as educators communicate to children. Students attend not only to what we preach but also to what we do. As a matter of course, schools do not just encourage but often aggressively promote reading by rewarding students with points, stickers, pizzas, or other external and even silly inducements to read, such as having the principal kiss a pig when students have read a certain number of books. If we don’t allow students to read in school at the same time that we tout the wonders of reading, what message are we sending to students about our values?

Furthermore, if we really believe that reading is probably not a good idea in school, then why assign it for homework or encourage it at all for that matter? Would any researcher, teacher, or administrator seriously tell parents they should not encourage their children to read because there’s not enough scientific evidence—using a medical model of research—to tell us that it helps? If reading is not worth doing in school, then it’s not worth the sacrifice of family time at home either. Our society values books. Certainly, it would be a betrayal of those values if we did not promote or allow real books and real reading in schools.

Therefore, having addressed the obstacles presented by misinterpretations of the research, we will

now examine other questions that teachers have about independent reading and offer practical variations on pure SSR that can make the process less daunting.

## Free Fall

Garan (2007) observed that allowing pure SSR in classrooms feels like free fall for teachers because it means letting go and giving up control. It means trusting that students with a book in front of them are actually reading. That loss of control can be daunting, particularly in the present climate of standards, mandated curricula, and accountability.

One looming question teachers face is, Should students really be left to read unmonitored? If a teacher permits students to read as she sits at her desk and reads too, will students actually read? Some research supports that they will (Cohen, 1999; Herda & Ramos, 2001; Von Sprecken & Krashen, 1998). Other research suggests that many students won’t (Stahl, 2004) and that some teacher monitoring may actually enhance students’ comprehension of and their appreciation for literature. Consequently, teachers have developed a number of innovations to pure SSR that resolve the tension between their need to monitor and establish accountability and students’ autonomy.

*If we don’t allow students to read in school at the same time that we tout the wonders of reading, what message are we sending to students about our values?*

## The Role of Common Sense and Teacher Praxis in SSR

Gambrell (2007) suggested that many newer innovations to SSR may actually enhance the benefits of silent reading. In addition, such innovations can afford teachers some degree of student monitoring so they are not pushed too far outside their comfort zone and compliance with standards and mandates. For example, many teachers and researchers have documented the importance of conversations as a way of extending students’ thinking, even as book clubs for adults can deepen *their* appreciation for and understanding of literature (Atwell, 2007; Cole, 2003; McLaughlin & DeVoogd, 2004). Other modifications

to traditional SSR can include conferences and minilessons to increase its effectiveness (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Pilgreen, 2000).

Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006) found that some of the students in Clausen-Grace's third-grade class engaged in "fake" reading—looking at the book superficially without actually attempting to read it. Their unique adaptation of SSR, R<sup>5</sup> (read, relax, reflect, respond, rap), requires the students to stay in one place anywhere in the classroom and read. Clausen-Grace arranged bathroom breaks before SSR time to preempt avoidance behaviors. She also made other modifications, such as peer sharing and conference logs, to focus the students and make sure they were on task. Clausen-Grace acted in praxis as a professional. She reflected on the challenges in her classroom; discussed them with Kelley, a university professor; and then subsequently refined her practice as a result of ongoing professional dialogues. Thus, theory, teaching methods, and common sense converged, in fact, after the second year of R<sup>5</sup>, Kelley and Clausen-Grace reported that the students gained 1.6 years on the Developmental Reading Assessment 4–8 (First edition, 2004).

Yet another promising innovation to traditional SSR is Scaffolded Silent Reading (ScSR; Reutzel et al., 2008). In this approach, "students were held accountable for reading widely across selected literary genres, setting personal goals for completing the reading of books within a timeframe, conferring with their teacher, and completing response projects to share the books they read with others" (p. 196). At the end of a year-long controlled experiment, the findings showed that the students engaged in ScSR made as much progress as those who participated in the more traditional Guided Repeated Oral Reading with feedback (GROR), thus assuaging the concerns of the principal who resisted SSR because of the perceived findings of the NRP report. Furthermore, both students and teachers involved in ScSR responded positively to the approach, as documented by surveys and journal responses.

Thus, SSR was more than just an enjoyable activity for students. These teacher-researchers reported that its use resulted in demonstrable growth in many areas of reading. Furthermore, it provided the participating teachers with hard data to support their innovations. This can serve as encouragement for other teachers to document student progress so they meet accountability requirements and district standards.

Other modifications to SSR provide opportunities for teachers to contribute to the process by modeling how mature readers approach books. Although some students come to school already familiar with books, many do not. For them, some intervention by and interaction with the teacher during SSR can provide the kind of modeling they've missed at home with their parents. Teachers can engage students by asking the kinds of questions parents ask as they read with children and by commenting on and extending the text to make stories relevant to the lives of young readers (Heath, 1982).

Although such modeling of story interactions and language can occur at other junctures in the school day and is typically associated with shared reading using Big Books, it can also support naïve (not *necessarily* struggling) readers and help them to engage more meaningfully with the text. As literate and literature-loving adults, teachers can scaffold children by providing an important middle step between total dependence on the teacher and true independent reading.

Teachers have yet more options to help them negotiate some of the roadblocks that may discourage them from implementing SSR. For example, often young children don't read silently. They don't always think silently either. As Vygotsky (1978) demonstrated, young children speak out loud as they think. For them, talk is essential to thought and action until they eventually develop "inner speech" (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, first-grade students who often don't read silently anyway may benefit from buddy reading or subvocalizing instead of the more orthodox version of SSR. Yet another advantage of buddy reading is that it provides children with an audience. By taking turns, each student has an opportunity to show off at reading, to perform a bit, thus promoting fluency in a natural way. When the buddy readers switch and the reader becomes the listener, she or he can then assume the role of the teacher, and in guiding the partner, internalize the supportive reading strategies that have been modeled by the teacher. And so by helping her or his partner, each internalizes and solidifies those teaching/scaffolding behaviors that are reflective of sound reading strategies.

Such extensions of SSR do not detract from the value of independent reading. Rather, they can be unobtrusive and natural and serve to increase student engagement as well as afford teachers a way of monitoring student involvement. Research shows it

is possible to successfully adjust literacy frameworks and instructional methods to meet the unique needs of the students as well as the beliefs and teaching styles of teachers (Fisher & Frey, 2007).

Kersten and Pardo (2007) observed that although policymakers envision uniformity and fidelity to mandated methods and materials, teachers “hybridize” and bring their own unique styles and beliefs to their instruction. In our view, that’s not just how it is. That’s how it should be. Certainly, sound research should inform practice. However, because—as we’ve demonstrated—research can be subject to error and misinterpretation, it should not supplant common sense and professional experience.

It is our hope that we have helped teachers and administrators untangle data from opinion, and that having reviewed the evidence from federal studies and federally sanctioned researchers, they now have a deeper understanding of the support for SSR. We hope we have helped to remove some of the roadblocks to SSR and that teachers will strive to implement it, whether it’s pure, a variation we’ve described here, or their own unique adaptation of it. The body of evidence on SSR reveals an alignment of research with what the professional judgment of many teachers has determined—Sustained Silent Reading benefits students, and so we see that SBRR and common sense converge.

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